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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VICE PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO TURKEY

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson for reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) Since your 2002 visit, US-Turkey relations have been buffeted by differences over Iraq, combatting the PKK, and the House Armenian genocide resolution. We are pulling out of that tailspin, largely due to recently expanded cooperation against the PKK. Anti-Americanism is easing and we are regaining influence. Even during strained relations, Turkey facilitated our logistics support to Iraq and Afghanistan through Incirlik and the Habur Gate, led the Iraq Neighbors process and worked to pull Sunnis into the Iraq political process in 2005-2007. It was at the table in Annapolis, and President Gul brought the Israeli and Palestinian presidents together in November for an unprecedented joint parliamentary appearance. The Turks have expanded their role as constructive partners on energy security, in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region in general. They were among the first to recognize Kosovo.

¶2. (C) Turkey needs to do more on Cyprus, Armenia, Iraq, Iran and on developing Caspian and Iraqi energy for its own and European markets. PM Erdogan and President Gul know these tough issues are the ones Turks need to face. There is a potential opening on Cyprus with the election of pro-settlement Christofias as president. If Armenia can resolve its internal conflict, there are prospects for progress there as well. We want to continue close coordination on our shared foreign policy priorities and encourage the government's domestic reform initiatives. We've underscored our messages and our commitment to improved dialogue through Ankara visits by three Cabinet members and Washington visits by President Gul and PM Erdogan, all in the past five months.

PKK/IRAQ/KURDS

¶3. (C) Your visit can help shape the government's action plan to control the PKK problem and strengthen Turkey-Iraq-US collaboration. With the PKK temporarily crippled by Turkey's recent military operations, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) must buck domestic resistance and press ahead with non-military initiatives aimed at permanently undermining PKK support. President Gul's invitation to President Talabani helps put bilateral relations on track after Turkey's February ground operation in northern Iraq; a meeting with a senior Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) representative, such as Nechirvan Barzani, would be an encouraging sign of KRG buy-in. Government proposals to increase Kurdish language broadcasting and

produce economic stimulus programs for Turkey's impoverished southeast are moving forward slowly, despite strong opposition from nationalists, the military and others who fear such measures will reward terrorists at the expense of Turkey's other struggling regions.

¶4. (C) At the same time, calls from opinion-makers to undertake non-military measures appear daily. PM Erdogan sent his top economic deputy twice to the region to identify investment opportunities and development priorities. Erdogan himself plans two sweeps through the southeast in March to showcase his government's new initiatives. Attention in 2003-2007 to building roads, schools, clinics and infrastructure in the southeast garnered AKP surprising political support during parliamentary elections last July, winning over voters from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). Erdogan is carefully stage-managing government efforts in the region, but appears determined -- both to resolve the country's Kurdish problem and to reap the political benefits in the southeast.

AKP'S AGENDA

¶5. (C) After a tumultuous 2007 that highlighted the economic, social and political upheavals Turkish society is undergoing, Erdogan and his government have so far failed to turn AKP's July electoral success into legislative victories. They out-maneuvered opponents to win control of the parliament and presidency, but squandered their momentum by making constitutional reform the top priority rather than pushing through less polarizing but much-needed economic and political initiatives. Ramadan, followed by a fall spike in PKK violence fully absorbed senior officials and further side-tracked needed reforms. When Erdogan pushed lifting Turkey's headscarf ban at universities to the top of the political agenda mid-January, critics accused the government of only being interested in advancing a narrow, "Islamist" agenda. The polarizing headscarf issue has dominated the domestic agenda for weeks, stalling progress on social security, labor and other reforms. Renewed focus on combating the PKK, including our intelligence sharing, has temporarily papered over civil-military tensions, but they remain.

¶6. (C) Erdogan's focus on winning the March 2009 local elections may make him reluctant to tackle such issues as Cyprus, Armenia, freedom of expression and Kurdish rights that inflame deep nationalist fears and could galvanize a weak and divided opposition. Politics within AKP also limit Erdogan's maneuverability; though he has successfully marginalized leaders of the party's pious and nationalist wings, Erdogan remains highly-tuned to his party's conservative grass-roots supporters.

EU MEMBERSHIP STILL THE GOLDEN COMPASS

¶7. (C) EU membership is the orienting focal point for Turkey's reform agenda, but tepid public support fueled by French and German opposition and nationalist fears that EU-related changes may threaten Kemalist principles have slowed progress considerably since 2005. Accession issues lie largely below the radar; the EU expects to open at best four chapters this year. The GOT declared 2008 the Year of EU and signalled efforts to revive accession-related reforms, such as amending Article 301 (insulting Turkishness). Parliament recently passed and President Gul approved a long-awaited Foundations Law, giving greater property rights to religious minorities, and the Turks are making steady progress with the EU at the technical level. The pressure is on to do more, as evidenced by a recent letter to President Gul signed by over 100 Turkish notables urging the GOT to take concrete steps, make up for lost time and advance Turkey's accession bid with determination.

HOW WE'RE PLAYING

¶8. (C) The Turks appreciate USG assistance with their domestic and foreign policy priorities; they are also keenly

aware where they have supported us with ours. Our relations are better than at any time since 2003, but the Iraq conflict remains deeply unpopular here. A replay in Congress of the Armenian genocide resolution will set relations back instantly, despite GOT recognition of the administration's unprecedented efforts to prevent a floor vote in 2007. The Turks need to switch from defense to offense on moving relations with Armenia forward, a message you may want to emphasize.

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